

Why J.K. Rowling is so incensed about Rupert Murdoch's tweet about 'Moslems'

By **Terrence McCoy** January 12, 2015

Aging conservative icon Rupert Murdoch has never had a problem lacing his Twitter account with provocative opinion. In a given month, he'll vacillate from the injustices of taxation to President Obama's policies, which he predicts will go "terribly wrong," to an issue that truly gets him riled: Muslims.

In 2013, the News Corp. tycoon got into hot water when he proclaimed on Twitter that "societies have to integrate," but lamented that "Muslims find it hardest." Last last year, Murdoch addressed the controversy over the nearly all-white cast of "Moses," which depicts Mideast Biblical events. "Moses film attacked on Twitter for all white cast," Murdoch mused. "Since when are Egyptians not white? All I know are."

On Sunday, Murdoch struck again. "Maybe most Moslems are peaceful, but until they recognize and destroy their growing jihadist cancer they must be held responsible," Murdoch declared. Then he dug his heels in. "Big jihadist danger looming everywhere from Philippines to Africa to Europe to US. Political correctness makes for denial and hypocrisy."

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As the comments went viral in the Internet Rage Machine, Murdoch perhaps sensed he had overstepped, and offered one last tweet: “Extraordinary scenes in Paris today, but do not forget the heroic sacrifice of Ahmed Merabet, Muslim police officer whose funeral was today.”

One of people leading the outrage was author J.K. Rowling, who immediately took issue with Murdoch’s proclamation and let loose with a barrage of pugnacious tweets.

“I was born Christian,” she said. “If that makes Rupert Murdoch my responsibility, I’ll auto-excommunicate. ... The Spanish Inquisition was my fault, as is all Christian fundamentalist violence. Oh, and Jim Bakker. ... Eight times more Muslims have been killed by so-called Islamic terrorists than non-Muslims.”

Lurking beneath that tiff, however, was another issue: Murdoch’s seemingly antiquated spelling of “Muslims.” He called them “Moslems.” The discrepancy became fodder for numerous observers: “Now, he is tweeting wrong, bigoted things about Muslims! (‘Moslems,’ actually),” wrote Gawker’s Brendan O’Connor. Vox added: “On Friday, Rupert Murdoch tweeted that Muslims (sorry, ‘Moslems’) should be ‘held responsible’ for terrorism unless they destroy jihadism.”

Those asides implied Murdoch had said something culturally insensitive, if not bigoted, when describing Muslims. But is the spelling “Moslem” bigoted, as commenters indicated on Sunday? Has standard English evolved beyond “Moslems,” which was once as common as using “the Orient”? Or are “Muslim” and “Moslem” interchangeable?

The answer to those questions lay in the years following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when thoughts on “Moslem” changed rapidly, according to the book “Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes: The Representation of Islam in the British Press.”

Indeed, for decades if not more, the British Empire used “Moslem” to refer to inhabitants of its Mideast colonial conquests. “Individual Moslems may show splendid qualities, but the influence of the religion paralyzes the social development of those who follow it,” Winston Churchill — who, by the way, may have considered converting to Islam as a young man — once wrote.

But then, after Sept. 11, that lackadaisical attitude changed. “Muslim is preferred,” according to the United Kingdom’s Society of Editors. “People refer to themselves as Muslims. Many regard Moslem as a term of abuse, like people of African descent like being called negroes. Also avoid Mohammedan and Musselman.”

What happened? Media “began to report more stories about Islam, which led newspapers needing to find ways to represent concepts and groups that were initially written in Arabic script but now required translations to the English alphabet,” according to “Discourse Analysis.” Most of the spelling differences didn’t seem ideological, such as the spelling “Osama bin Laden” or “al Qaeda.” But one was different.

“Although the above examples do not seem especially ideological, a notable distinction arises around the spelling of Muslim,” the authors wrote. They found between 1998 and 2003, the word “Muslim” occurred nearly 200,000 times in British newspapers, while “Moslem” was used merely 7,000 times. The papers that used it the most were the most conservative, calling it “evidence of a subtle form of hostility.” The conservative Daily Mail was the major proponent of the word “Moslem” until it suddenly dropped it in 2004, two years after the Media Committee of the Muslim Council of Britain sent a letter to its editors asking it to stop.

“They specifically objected to the spelling Moslem, as they noted that it can be pronounced as ‘mawzlem,’ which is the Arabic word for *oppressor*,” according to “Discourse Analysis.”

The History News Network, hosted by George Mason University, agreed the roots of the word betray its prejudice. “Muslim” means Muslim. But “Moslem” means something entirely different. “Whereas for most English speakers, the two words are synonymous in meaning, the Arabic roots of the two words are very different,” the article said. “A ‘Muslim’ in Arabic means ‘one who gives himself to God,’ and is by definition, someone who adheres to Islam. By contrast a ‘Moslem’ in Arabic means ‘one who is evil and unjust’ when the word is pronounced, as it is in English, ‘Mozlem’ with a z.”

Still, there are holdouts for “Moslem” beyond Murdoch — like the American Moslem Foundation. But in other sectors, change is afoot. When the History News Network reported its story, Hartford Seminary’s journal was called “The Moslem World.” And now? “The Muslim World.”

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Terrence McCoy covers poverty, inequality and social justice. He also writes about solutions to social problems.
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